

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

Issue Number 1

Autumn 2003

Contents *(This issue of the e-Newsletter was revised in 2007)*

- **Hello Ivansker Landsleiters.**
Introducing The Ivansk Project and The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter
- **How You Can Participate in *The Ivansk Project!***
- **How You Can Contact Us.**
- **A Visit to Ivansk (April, 1996).** *by Norton Taichman*
Norton describes his visit to our ancestor's shtetl

Hello Ivansker Landsleiters!

The purpose of this communication is to introduce the ***The Ivansk Project*** and ***The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter*** to those who trace their roots to Ivansk (Iwaniska in Polish).

Most of us are second and third generations removed from the shtetl and know very little about the 400 years that our ancestors lived there. Only a handful of Jews who were born in Ivansk are alive today; once they're gone the story of Jewish Ivansk may fade into oblivion. The Ivansk Project won't let this happen; our purpose is to try to preserve our ancestors' history.

The Project was begun about a year ago: we aim to document Jewish Life in Ivansk. We've been accumulating testimony from "original" Ivanskers as well as documents and maps of the town. But we've only just begun to scratch the surface and much more research still needs to be done. We need your help to accomplish our goal and hope that you'll join with us. Ultimately, we will develop a memorial or Yiskor Book to honor our ancestors.

The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter will keep you abreast of our research and invite your participation in ***The Project***. Together, we can acquire deeper insights into who we are and where we came from and also preserve our heritage for future generations.

Jews first settled in Ivansk in the 17th century and by the 1930s approximately 2,000 lived in the shtetl, representing about two-thirds of the population. No Jews live in Ivansk anymore: it is difficult to estimate how many survived the war. During the German occupation many fled to Russia or into the forests where they hid or joined the underground. Several were taken to Nazi labor camps and managed to hang on until liberation. And some were given refuge by Polish Christians. In October

1942 about 1,600 Jews were deported to their deaths in Treblinka: approximately 300 ran to the woods in an attempt to escape but almost all were recaptured and murdered.

Even before the war life was never easy in Ivansk: for most, it was a struggle just to survive. There was no reason to believe that things would get better, and beginning in the early 1900s a continual stream of emigrants sought a better life in distant lands, including Canada, Israel, United States, Colombia and Argentina. Most prospered in their adopted countries, and undreamt of opportunities became available to their children and their children's children. With time Ivansk became a distant memory. In fact, many of our parents and grandparents wanted to forget about Poland and rarely spoke about their lives in the shtetl. Consequently, few of us know very much about the history of our families before they left Poland.

It is amazing how many Ivansker descendents have been identified since *The Ivansk Project* began. The vast majority live in the Toronto area. Others can be found in the USA, Israel, South America and we don't know where else. Several Ivanskers have contacted members of *The Project's Action Committee*: their numbers have grown so large that it is difficult to keep track of them on an individual basis. The *e-Newsletter* will enhance our ability to stay in touch with one another. We want to reach out to other Ivanskers who are not known to us. Help us get in touch with these people; instructions on how to do this will be given below.

The first critical step in documenting the story of our ancestral community is to secure testimony from those who were born in the shtetl. Time is not on our side and we need to mount a concerted effort to reach as many as possible. We want to learn about their culture, their joys and sorrows and the rhythm of their daily lives in Ivansk before the outbreak of the war in 1939. We want to try to grasp what happened to them during *The Shoah*. Finally, we want to hear how they persevered and carried on after the war.

The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter will feature topics that are relevant to our community. Including:

POTENTIAL TOPICS	COMMENTS
Names/addresses of living Ivanskers and their descendents	
History of Ivansk	General history of Ivansk before 1939 and history of Ivansker Jews including list of names, occupations, etc
Archival Records	LDS archives, Polish archives, Israeli archives
Daily Shtetl Life	Birth, Marriage, Death, Work, School, Shul, Market Day, Entertainment, etc
Religion	Shades of Orthodoxy, Observance of Shabbat and Holidays, Influence of Rabbis, The Shul, The Besmedresh, The Mikvah, etc
Artifacts	Ivansk maps and photos, birth certificates, postcards, personal documents (eg, passport, military papers, marriage certificate, etc)
Cemetery	Description of the desecrated Jewish cemetery. Names of those who were buried in cemetery as well as cemeteries in other countries
Emigration before War II	Reasons; Time frame(s); Arrangements; Routes; Destinations; Photos (ship; manifest, shipboard; Portals: HIAS, Naturalization, etc
Landsmanschaften	Ivansk Mutual Benefit Society (Toronto) and other organizations (eg, shuls, clubs).
Holocaust	History of Nazi occupation. Stories from survivors. Names of those who perished in the Holocaust.
Post Holocaust Emigration	Rescue from Europe; Destinations, Barriers, Reception, Establishing new life, etc

Articles/Documents	" <i>Ivansk Pinchas Hakehillot</i> "; etc
Family Histories	From original Ivanskers and their descendents
Polish-Jewish Relations	Before and during the war.
Family Tree Forum	Access to genealogical data via personal and web links
Bibliography	References and acknowledgments
Ivansk Today	Personal diary of visitors to Poland and Ivansk (photos, drawings, etc). Travel advice for those who want to visit the shtetl.
Links	Sites related to the shtetl and its people (eg, immigration portals, family trees, shtetl sites, Holocaust history, museums, etc)
Guestbook	Inviting comments, critiques, suggestions, contact, etc
Ivansk Humor	Vignettes about characters and life in Ivansk
Ivansk Recipes	How to make gefilte fish, cholent, peh-chah; matzo brei, etc
Question and Answer Column	Ivanskers seeking relatives and friends.
Announcements	Conferences, exhibits, film festivals, book reviews, etc
Editorials	
Other	

How you can participate in *The Ivansk Project*!

Join with us in writing the story of our ancestors. Here is what you can do:

- We need to reach anyone who was born in Ivansk and get his or her testimony. Please provide us with their names, addresses and telephone numbers. If they are family or friends, consider recording their oral testimony. We'll provide guidelines to help.
- Send us the names, e-mail and postal addresses) of other people who would be interested in being on our mailing list. We are especially anxious to reach younger generations of Ivanskers.
- Contact us with your suggestions and volunteer to help us with expertise you may have that is relevant to *The Project*.
- Contribute stories or material on any of the topics listed above; contact us with your ideas.
- Copies of photos taken in Ivansk would be especially welcome. As yet, we do not have a single image of the town when it was still inhabited by Jews. We're also interested in copies of immigration certificates, travel documents as well as recollections of the routes taken out of Poland to a new life.

Most important; share the *e-Newsletter* with your children and grandchildren. They'll be responsible for preserving our ancestor's story in the future. Discuss your family's history. If you have living relatives who were born in Ivansk, encourage your children to speak with them about the past.

A Visit to Ivansk (April, 1996)

by Norton Taichman (Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA)

My father (Louis; *Lemel* in Yiddish) was born in Ivansk in 1906 and immigrated to Toronto in 1920, together with his mother (Rose; *Rhuda*); older sister (Lilli; *Rivka Leiyah*) and younger brother (Max; *Myer*). My grandfather, *Chaim* (“*Chamol*”) Teichman preceded his family arriving in Canada in 1910.

My father had no love loss for the Old World and I grew up knowing little about the shtetl or my dad’s boyhood. After his death this void began to gnaw at me and I felt that a visit to Ivansk might fill some of the blanks. The opportunity presented itself in 1996 when I was on a sabbatical in London, England.

In March an announcement appeared in *The Jewish Chronicle* (the oldest and most widely read Jewish newspaper in the UK) indicating that a local synagogue was organizing a trip to Poland to take part in *The March of the Living*. Together with 30 fellow travelers my wife (Louise) and I took off from Heathrow on April 14. As our jetliner flew eastward my mind raced across the centuries of Jewish history in Poland, and at the risk of gross oversimplification I shall try to briefly summarize some of my thoughts.

Beginning in the 13th and 14th centuries waves of Ashkenazim migrated to the eastern lands because they were being subjected to intolerable persecution in the “German Empire”. At that time “Poland” was a haven for Jews. They were welcomed and granted special economic, social and autonomous (self government) privileges by the ruling nobility. During the 15th and 16th centuries the Jewish community expanded and prospered, and with time Poland evolved to become the epicenter of Ashkenazi culture in the Diaspora.

But by the 17th century the peasants and the Church became increasingly resentful of the Jewish presence. The serfs regarded Jews as lackeys of the oppressive nobility while the Church accused them of deicide and undermining its authority. To make matters worse, Jews were accused of ritual murder of Christian children and of collaborating with the Swedes who had invaded Poland in 1654. Growing hostility sparked anti-Jewish riots and pogroms and established a pattern of Judeophobia in Poland that continues to this day.

In 1772-1795 the status of the Jews dramatically changed when the Kingdom of Poland was partitioned by Russia, Austria and Prussia. Most of the Jews lived under Russian rule, where conditions were especially harsh. The privileges previously accorded to them were rescinded and they were subjected to increasing governmental pressure to transform into “useful” subjects and to convert and assimilate into the general population. But the vast majority of Polish Jews resisted all attempts to subvert their identity. During the 19th century Jews were emancipated throughout most of Western Europe and made unprecedented cultural, political and economic contributions to their respective nations. But in the feudal east the “old order” prevailed well into the 20th century. Jews were scorned as alien parasites, exploiters of the peasants and fomenters of liberalism, socialism and revolution.

At the end of the First World War Polish independence was reestablished. Over 3 million Jews (approximately 10% of the population) lived in the new republic. The Treaty of Versailles

supposedly guaranteed their rights but long-standing anti-Jewish prejudices remained entrenched in the Polish psyche and intense nationalism became a dominant feature in political and economic life. There was a growing sentiment that Poland's "Jewish problem" could only be solved by getting rid of the Jews.

In 1939 the invasion of Poland by the Germans signaled the beginning of the end of Jewish Civilization in Poland and in other parts of Europe. By 1944 Poland had become the world's largest Jewish graveyard. The Poles also suffered cruelly under the Nazis, and it is important to remember that many courageous Poles risked their lives to save Jews. However, most remained indifferent to the plight of their neighbors; they had problems of their own. But sadly, many assisted in the roundup or the murder of Jews. Less than 10% of Poland's Jews survived the war, and when they returned to their homes they were often greeted with scorn and violence by their neighbors. After the war most Jews left for the United States and Israel. Nonetheless, state- and church-sponsored xenophobia remained endemic in Poland long after the country was essentially free of Jews.

Now back to our trip.

We had left England bathed in spring sunshine and color, but winter had not loosened its grip on Poland. Upon landing in Warsaw we were greeted by dark, ominous snow clouds and bone-chilling winds. As we boarded the tour bus our guide announced that we were heading northeast. Our destination: Treblinka. We hadn't been in Poland more than an hour and already we were confronted by the enormity of what had happened here.

Between July 1942 and April 1943 over 800,000 Jews were gassed in Treblinka. Today, an eerie silence pervades the scene where indescribable pain was inflicted on innocent people. A mass grave and a large stone monument dominate the center of the field and on the periphery, hundreds of symbolic tombstones have been erected: most bear the name of a town from which Jews were deported to this horrible place.

My wife and I searched for the Ivansk matzevah but after about 20 minutes I was ready to quit. Then, Louise spotted it: a stark, grey boulder pointing accusingly to the sky: "Iwaniska" was chiseled into its surface. We stood in silence in the depths of loneliness and despair.

Over the next 5 days we traveled to other extermination camps including Auschwitz-Birkenau where we joined the *March of the Living*. Thousands of young people paid homage to those who had been murdered and vowed never to wear the yellow star again. We were very proud to be in their company. In Warsaw, Cracow and other towns we explored former Jewish sections and ghettos, Jewish cemeteries and shuls. No one will ever fully understand the madness that engulfed Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, but my trip to Poland brought me closer than ever to appreciating the scope of what had happened to our people.

On the 6th day of the journey the weather markedly improved, melting the remnants of snow from the hills and fields. Louise and I temporarily broke away from our companions to visit Ivansk. We hired a "guide" through Orbis, the largest travel agency in Poland. That turned out to be a mistake: Orbis charged an exorbitant fee (approximately \$300.00 US) and its guide was inexperienced, lacking the instincts and the insights to undertake his assignment. The drive south from Warsaw took about 3 hours, and as we passed through Apt (in Polish, Opatow; the home of my mother's parents) I knew we were only minutes away from our destination.

Gently rolling hills and dark forests surround Ivansk and in the fields farmers were starting to plow with horse or donkey. Early spring is the good time to visit the shtetl; during the summer (our second visit in August 2000) lush green growth obscures many interesting features of the town, such as the market square. More important, portions of the Jewish cemetery are inaccessible due to the overgrowth of dense bramble (more on this below).



The Road from Apt (looking to the north)
 Driving south from Apt (Opatow) we arrive at the outskirts of Ivansk. This is the first real day of spring after the long, hard winter. Farmers are already busy in the fields. Horse drawn ploughs are a common sight. The countryside reminds me of the rolling hills of Southern Ontario.



First Sight of Ivansk
 The view is from the bridge that spans the stream running beneath the Road to Apt. A regional bus stop is on the right.

The first impression of Ivansk is that it has been frozen in time. The roads are paved; there's indoor plumbing and electricity, and the town is clean as a whistle. But its pulse is barely perceptible. Overall, it's a pretty dreary place. A small library is the only evidence of cultural activity; however, there may be other communal facilities we were not aware of. Aside from agricultural pursuits there is little evidence of other commercial activity and many men have been unemployed since the fall of the communist regime. (A business directory of Ivansk was published in 1929. At that time the shtetl was humming with artisans and tradesmen. The directory will be published in a future *e-Newsletter* [see: *e-News #11, March-April 2005*].) At best, health care is

marginal in today's Ivansk; many adults have gaping spaces in their jaws with remnants of protruding, broken down teeth.

The villagers we spoke to through the guide were friendly, although a few kept their distance. Some of the older folks remembered their Jewish neighbors and said that the two peoples got along with each other. However, it was obvious that both lived in different, distant worlds. For

instance, the fire hall stands on the site of the former shul. There's a plaque on the wall dedicated to several local inhabitants who were killed by the Nazis. There's no mention of the murdered Jews or the fact that a house of prayer once stood here. I don't think this is simply a manifestation of overt anti-Semitism; instead, I suspect it primarily reflects the long-standing social and cultural gulf that separated Jews and Poles. Jews no longer figure in the town's consciousness.



The Town Square Looking to the North.

Before the war the market was held here on Mondays. The square was crowded with Jewish merchants, Polish peasants and farmers, wagons, vending stalls, horses, sheep and poultry. Jewish homes and businesses surrounded the square. In the summer this view is obscured by profuse growth of trees and shrubs. On the right note the bus stop and kiosk on Der Apter Weg. Now, most roads in Ivansk are paved. But in the 1930s the unpaved roads were often impassable during heavy winter and spring storms. The Town Hall forms part of the block of two-story buildings. **Below:** some of the shops, cottages and the church that border on the square.





Left: A Cottage. According to an “original” Ivansker this white-washed cottage resembled many of the houses in Ivansk before WW2. With the exception of the church, most of the town was destroyed during the war.

Right: The Fire Hall. The fire hall is situated where the shul once stood. On returning to Ivansk in 2005 I was told that the shul was destroyed when the Russians bombed the town in 1944. The fire hall has since been converted to a community center.

The Jewish burial ground is (was) about 2 km outside the town off the Road to Rakow. It is situated on a gentle slope, nestled among ploughed fields, but you’ll never find it unless someone shows you where it is. A peasant woman who we met by chance on the road took us there: she lives on a farm adjacent to the cemetery. She had lots to say about what happened to the Jews under German occupation but we missed most of it, as our guide seemed to be uncomfortable by some of her revelations.

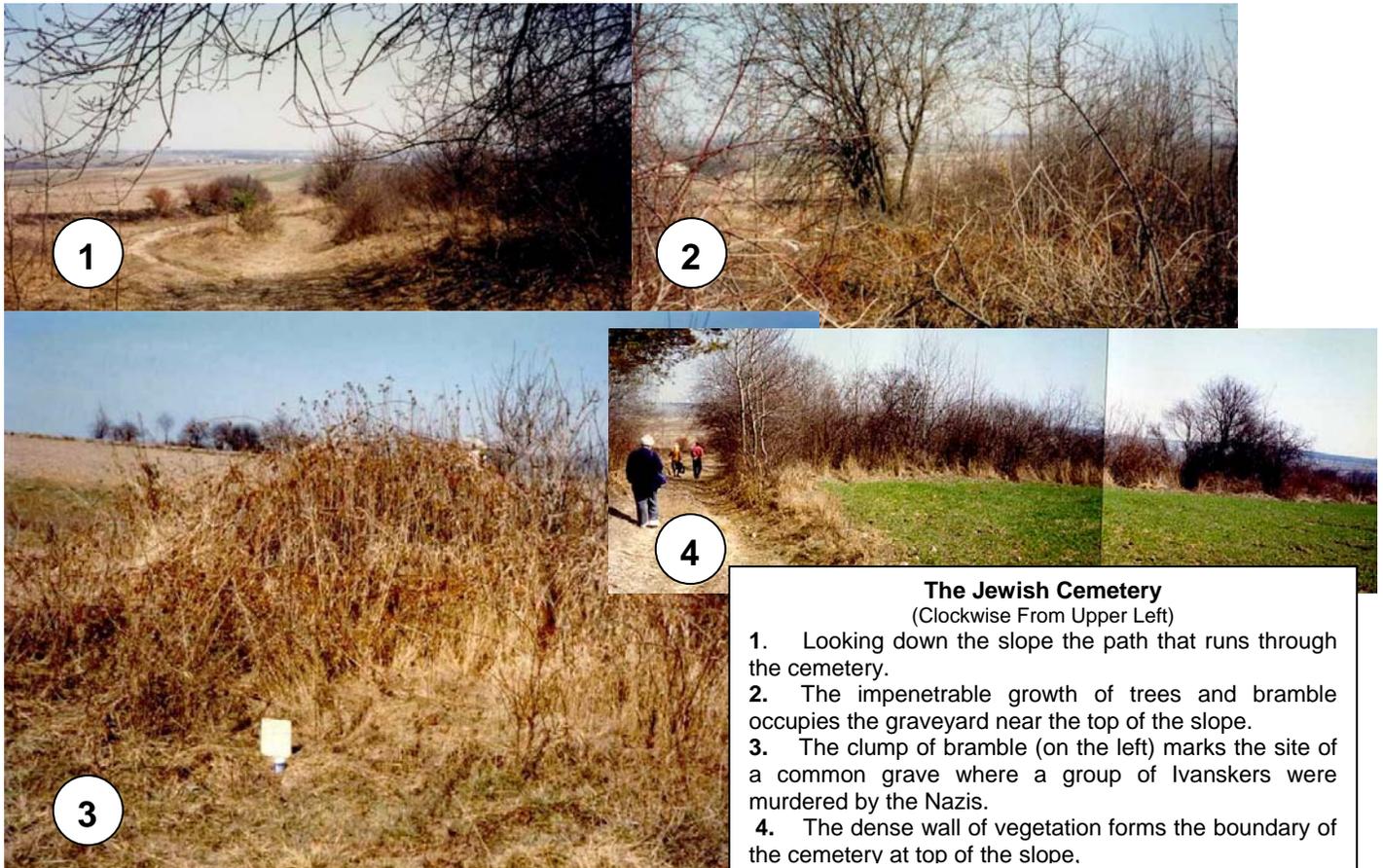


The Jewish Cemetery Outside Iwaniska

The Jewish cemetery is located on a gentle slope about 2 km outside town. Today, no overt evidence of the graveyard remains: the wall and the tombstones are gone. The photo was taken from the dirt road which leads from the Road to Rakow to the cemetery. Surrounded by ploughed fields the cemetery has been overtaken by vegetation; the clumps of trees in the center of the photo occupy the burial ground.

The cemetery has been devastated. The boundary wall and all its tombstones are gone. The main section is overgrown with scrub and prickly bramble. We were able to creep through the barrier because it was early spring: during our summer visit in 2000 this part of the cemetery is impenetrable. We discovered a few headstone foundations and small, broken flakes of tombstones. I wanted to take these fragments with me but thought I might be perpetrating the desecration. Now I am sorry that I didn't rescue these artifacts for safekeeping. Unbelievably, vandals armed with metal detectors had been digging in the earth for gold or other valuables supposedly buried in the graves of the "rich" Jews. The woman showed us where several Jews had been massacred by the Nazis and buried in an unmarked grave. We recited *The Kaddish*, lit a *Yahrzeit candle* and placed a wooden marker in the ground.

As a consequence of *The Ivansk Project's* on-going research, we know that on the day before they were deported the Jews of Ivansk gathered in the cemetery to bury their *Torahs*, *siddurim* and other sacred objects. An eyewitness account of this terrible moment will be published in a future issue of the *e-Newsletter* [see *e-News #3, March-April 2004*]. In addition, we have testimony that Poles destroyed the cemetery after the Germans had been driven from Ivansk by the advancing Soviets. It is hard to comprehend how people could wantonly desecrate the cemetery, even those who were happy to see us disappear. Not everyone approved or behaved in such a shameful manner. Nevertheless, it is difficult to maintain your perspective and not indict the entire nation.



The trip to Poland and to Ivansk was a very heavy experience. You need to know how to recite *Kaddish* before undertaking such a journey. I was emotionally drained for weeks after returning to England. But it was something I had to do and it has changed my life.

I now feel more directly involved in the history of our people in general and my ancestors in particular. The journey was the stimulus for undertaking The Ivansk Project. I have since returned to Ivansk to gather more impressions and to search for any records of its former Jewish inhabitants. But I was told that no relevant archives are left in the town or in other repositories. Apparently, the town's records were lost or destroyed during the war. Thus, we are almost entirely dependent upon our own resources to write the history of Jewish Life in Ivansk.



The Well

This photo was taken on the Road to Staszow where one of the communal wells is located. The well is no longer in use. But before indoor plumbing at least 4 wells served the community. You can consult the 'Kesten-Brauner Map of Ivansk' to see who lived in this section of town in the 1930s (see: Ivansk Project e-Newsletter No. 26, Sept-Oct 2007).

Addendum, August 2007: It is now 11 years since my first visit to Poland and Iwaniska. I have returned several times, and my feelings toward Poland and its people have shifted in a more positive direction. While I will never forgive or forget the dark chapters of the past, I now understand that the negative attitudes I once held were not based on judging each individual on the basis of his/her character.

Over the succeeding decade I have met many fine people in Poland and in Iwaniska; they have welcomed me and treated me with every courtesy. And many have impressed me with their good will and their lack of racial or ethnic bias. Based on my on-going experience I have reason to hope that Polish-Jewish relations are moving in a positive and constructive direction. I plan to report on subsequent trips to Poland in future editions of the *e-Newsletter*.

The names and email addresses of the members of our *Action Committee* are listed below. You can contact any of them with your ideas, questions or information. Let us know what you think about *The Project*.

Ivansk Project Action Committee		
Fred Apel	USA	fredapel@usa.net
Sydney Kasten	Israel	kostenl@012.net.il
David Lederman	Israel	dalederman@bezeqint.net
Ellen and Sonny Monheit	Canada	sonnell@rogers.com
Lisa Newman	Canada	lisa.newman.a@utoronto.ca
Betty Provizer Starkman	USA	bettejoy@aol.com
Norton Taichman (Project Co-coordinator)	USA	nstaichman@comcast.net
Arthur Zimmerman	Canada	arthurz@look.ca

Please, send the names and addresses of other Ivanskers who might be interested in receiving the *e-Newsletter*.

Get in touch with us with questions or suggestions. You are most welcome to contribute material for publication in the *e-Newsletter*.

If you do not want to receive the *e-Newsletter*, send us an e-mail placing "UNSUBSCRIBE" in the subject heading.